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A tale of two paintings

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Introduction

This essay is concerned with two great paintings of King Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons. One, painted on a panel of oak, has been in the possession of the Company of Barber Surgeons for an unbroken period of 440 years; the other, painted on canvas, was purchased by the Company of Surgeons in 1786, 41 years after the Surgeons seceded from the Barbers, and hangs in the Great Hall of the College. In a previous article in this journal (1) some of the history of the College painting was recounted and details were given of a radiological investigation carried out on the College painting; illustrations and historical evidence included in that paper will not be reiterated here.

Brief history of the Barbers' painting

Much has been written about the Barbers' painting. A description by Van Mander in 1604, cited by Strong (2), while eulogising this 'admirable work' of Holbein, may well be the source of the view repeated by subsequent authors that Holbein did not complete the painting. The circumstantial evidence to support this possibility is that Holbein died in 1543 and may not have had time to finish the work, but it seems more likely that defects in the picture are attributable to alterations made by lesser hands after it had been completed.

One of the precious possessions of the Barbers' Company (that can be seen at the Guildhall Library) is a letter from King James I written on 13th January 1618. 'We are informed,' the King wrote, 'of a table of Painting in your Hall whereon is the picture of our Predecessor of famous memorie K. Henry the 8th, together with diverse of your Companie, which being both like him and well done Wee are desirous to have copyd.' According to Sidney Young, whose book (3) is a rich storehouse of information on the history of the Company and its possessions, 'the Court of course agreed to lend the picture, though doubtless with some misgivings; contrary however to the practice of the time when money was "lent" to the King, it found its way back to the Hall.' Young then goes on to say, 'In 1627, Charles I, a more suspicious borrower than his father, had it to Whitehall, but again we fortunately had it returned.'

The next renowned episode in its long history is chronicled by none other than Samuel Pepys, who visited the Barber-Surgeons' Hall in 1668 with the intention of buying the painting from the Company, as he put it, 'for a little money; I did think to give £200 for it, it being said to be worth a thousand'. However, the offer was refused and Pepys, perhaps in pique, said he had no mind for the picture anyway because it had been spoiled. This, it is speculated, refers to damage caused in the Great Fire of London two years previously. On that occasion the Company's Hall had been burnt down, but there is mention in the records of the Company that payment had been made for carrying the picture to safety. Although it had been rescued, however, subsequent evidence suggests that some damage was done at the time and it may be to this that Pepys was referring when he described the picture as spoiled.

Samuel Pepys was not alone in his harsh criticism. Several authors over subsequent years have commented adversely on various aspects of the work. In a book published in 1872 Woltmann (4) expressed the view that although the composition as a whole was Holbein's work and that his masterly hand is unmistakable in some of the heads, there were others that were unimportant and inferior. Among many other criticisms of the painting is one made by the art critic of *The Times* on 31st December 1889 when describing the Tudor Exhibition held at that time. His disparaging comment is of interest not so much for what it said as for the response it evoked. The critic said there was no doubt whatever that the Barbers' Company had commissioned Holbein to paint it. 'The fact is, however, that there is extremely little of Holbein's work in the picture. It is an old tradition that he did not live to finish it and what is certain is, if he did finish it some clumsy hand at some time or other had been employed to paint all over it again . . .' The response came in a letter to the Editor a few days later and was written by a doughty champion, none other than Sidney Young, the author of *Annals of the Barber Surgeons*. Mr Young bridled, to say the least: 'I must also venture to differ with your critic in his statement "that some clumsy hand at one time or other had been employed to paint all over it again", as there



FIG. 1 'King Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons' belonging to the Barbers' Company of the City of London.



FIG 2 'King Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons' belonging to the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

is not a particle of evidence which would warrant such an assertion'. And again, 'Pepys could not get it for a fifth of what it was said to be worth so he forthwith illustrated the fable of "the fox and the grapes"', insinuating that it had been spoiled in the great fire'.

Brief history of the College painting

The first reference to the College painting is set out in the Minute Book of the Court of Assistants of the Company of Surgeons in a passage dated 6th July 1786 (Fig. 2 in (1)). In this the Court had been informed that in a sale of pictures by Noel Desenfans, a well-known art dealer of that time, 'a large and capital picture was exposed to sale being a cartoon painted by Hans Holbein representing King Henry VIII delivering the charter to the Barber Surgeons'. The picture had been examined by Mr Watson, the Master of the Company, and Mr Grindall and, having satisfied themselves of its authenticity and 'thinking such an opportunity of procuring the possession of such a picture should not be missed', they had treated for the purchase and, having reduced the terms to 50 guineas, they had concluded the deal. How the cartoon had come into the possession of the seller is not known, but the catalogue of the sale at Christie's is in the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum and, judging by the price of £105 denoted in the left-hand margin, Messrs Watson and Grindall had driven a hard bargain. It is gratifying to note that the Minutes recorded that 'this Court doth highly approve of the conduct of the Master and Mr Grindall on this occasion and return them thanks for their attention to the concerns of the Company'. Well they might!

Soon after the picture was purchased it is recorded in the Minutes of the Company that it was restored by a Mr Lloyd for 50 guineas. Lloyd's original bill was eight times that amount and his work was described as 'cleaning and repairing'. The extent of cleaning and overpainting is not known, nor can Lloyd's identity be established with any certainty (see (1)).

The next reference to the picture in the College documents appears in the notebook of William Clift, the first Conservator of the Hunterian Museum. He described it as a cartoon and said that 'it is esteemed to be the Original from which the Picture in the Hall of the Barber-Surgeons Company . . . was painted'. Clift also records that the initials HH and the date 15 . . . were disclosed when the picture was cleaned in 1819. The Minutes of the Board of Curators of June 1819 indicate that cleaning and varnishing had been carried out by a Mr Bigg and not by Clift, as has been suggested elsewhere.

The College picture has been no less controversial than that which belongs to the Barbers and there have been various theories concerning its origins. Arthur Chamberlain (5), in a book on Holbein published in 1913, correctly described the College painting as having been done on paper attached to canvas but repeated the old misconception that it was a copy made for James I. There is no evidence that a copy was ever made for King James. The fact that the Barbers' painting was borrowed not many years later by Charles I makes it seem doubtful that a version had been painted for his father and there is no record of its existence in the inventories of Royal Collections (2). In a letter to *The Times* on 3rd February 1890 George Redford, who had cleaned the Barbers' painting 12 years previously, found it impossible to accept that the College picture was a copy made for James I because there were so many differences in the background and even in the numbers of men; he pointed out that the blade of the King's sword was white instead of dark, his stockings white instead of crimson — differences that no copyist would have taken upon himself to carry out.

X-ray examination of the painting

When two such similar paintings exist, and each of ancient lineage, there are bound to be arguments about authenticity. Because the Barbers' painting had remained in the possession of the Company since 1541 there had always been a tendency to regard the College painting as a later copy, probably because the suit of armour and other trappings in the College picture were so obviously later additions. Against this, however, the magnificence of the King and the striking faces of many of his subjects were an unending source of interest and admiration. It was in an attempt to resolve the mystery that the radiographic examination of the College's picture was undertaken and this surprisingly afforded corroboration of the original description in the Minutes of the Company of Surgeons (Fig. 2 in (1)) — namely, that the College picture was 'a cartoon painted by Hans Holbein'.

The procedure Holbein followed when executing a composition of this size was to carry out an initial version on separate sheets of paper known as cartoons (from the Italian *cartone*, meaning a large sheet of paper). The famous Chatsworth cartoon of Henry VIII survives as a supreme example of this stage of Holbein's work. The completed cartoon would presumably be approved by those commissioning the picture and could then be used in one of two ways: when the final painting was to be done on a panel (as was the case with the Barbers' version) the cartoon was

used as a stencil, detail being transferred by affixing it to the panel, perforating the outlines of the drawing, and dusting charcoal on to the surface; alternatively the cartoons could be pasted on to a canvas and then overpainted so that the paper remained buried between the surface paint and the underlying canvas. The use of X-rays, by revealing a pattern of dots corresponding to the perforations on the cartoons, showed that Holbein's cartoons of Henry VIII and the Barber Surgeons had in fact been used in both ways: first they had been perforated and used as the template for the Barbers' painting and then they had been affixed to canvas and used as the basis for the College painting (see also (1)). In his book on the life of Holbein Woltmann (4) refers to signs of tiny holes on the wooden panel: 'The composition of the whole certainly belongs to our Master; he transferred to the panel the heads of the kneeling foremen of the Guild, the greater number being from his own sketches; the traces of pin-holes by which this was done are partly to be seen'. If this remarkable observation is true it indicates, surprisingly perhaps, that the cartoons were not perforated before being affixed to the panel but that the whole stencilling operation was done when they were already in position.

The King (Fig. 3)

Tracing the dots on the radiographs of the cartoon is a source of endless fascination. The radiograph of King Henry's right eye, for example (Fig. 4 in (1)), includes a dotted outline of the eyelid, the eyeball, and even the iris. It is hard to peer into a Holbein painting of King Henry's eyes without a touch of trepidation. Nothing could be more apposite than the description of them given by David Piper in a broadcast describing another of Holbein's portraits of the King. 'The eyes', he said, 'are level and very direct . . . like the blue-grey openings of twin gun-barrels'. These eyes, though, are only part fulfilment of the artist's intention. Every feature of these pictures — the magnificence of the original background, the King's regalia, the expressions on the faces of the congregation, the tablet of Latin verse — every feature is directed towards enhancing the image of the King.

The King may not have realised the extent to which Holbein would secure his image for posterity — but it seems that he was not unappreciative. One day, according to Horace Walpole (6), Holbein was busy painting in his studio when he was rudely interrupted by a noble lord. The painter tried to continue with his work, but the lord became more and more insistent until Holbein, goaded beyond endurance, threw him down a flight of stairs and slammed the door. This shocking affront was at once reported to the King

by the indignant nobleman, but he was ignominiously dismissed, the monarch declaring that of seven peasants he could make as many lords, but not one Holbein.

The King's Physicians

Although the King dominates both pictures to such an extent, as indeed the artist intended him to do, the portraits of his subjects are of great artistic and historical importance. At the King's right are two physicians, John Chambers and William Butts, witnesses to this solemn occasion and both well known for other reasons. Chambers had been Physician to Henry VIII and later, as King's Physician, was present at the incorporation of the College of Physicians in 1518 and his name was placed first on the list of that College; he was also in attendance at the birth of Elizabeth I. Butts had great influence with Henry and is famous for his intervention on behalf of Cranmer, an incident that is described in Act V, Scene II, of Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII*. These two physicians make more than a merely aesthetic contribution to the two paintings for there are in existence two Holbein portraits of them, that of Chambers in Vienna and that of Butts in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Each is an authentic Holbein and the opportunity to superimpose radiographs on a reproduction of each painting has been described previously (1).

The correspondence between the radiographs and these two portraits serves further to corroborate the authenticity of the cartoons and indicates that at the time of the execution of the painting Holbein presumably undertook individual commissions, just as a photographer today having executed a group photograph might offer individual enlargements to order.

The front row of Barbers and Surgeons (Fig. 5)

At the King's left is Thomas Vicary, Master of the Company of Barber Surgeons in 1541. He alone among the King's subjects is more than a spectator on this awesome occasion, being the recipient of a document from the King. That a man born towards the end of the 15th century whose professional beginnings were those of a humble practitioner in the county of Kent should have his name honoured at this annual commemoration might seem extraordinary. In his lifetime, however, Vicary had attained great eminence, for he had treated, successfully, the 'sore leg' of the most powerful man on earth and had been appointed Sergeant-Surgeon to this almighty monarch. To the right of Vicary is Sir John Aylef, Master of the Company in 1538 and also Surgeon to the King. His is perhaps the most striking face of all and much is written about him in Young's book on the



FIG. 3 *The King. Detail from the College painting.*

Barber Surgeons. After Aylef comes Symson, of whom little is known except that he was the King's Barber and Master of the Company in 1537. The next man too was a King's Barber, Edmund Harman, and he had been Master of the Company in 1540, although not having served as Warden previously and being relatively junior in the Company. He may well have attained such eminence through royal favour, for there are several references to him in State papers and he received a substantial bequest in the King's will. A curious discrepancy between Harman of the Royal College of Surgeons and Harman of the Barber Surgeons is that in the College picture he is clean-shaven and in that belonging to the Barbers he has a beard. Which has been altered? Turning to X-rays for the answer the vote for authenticity must go to the Barbers. In the radiograph his face is clearly delineated and the pattern of dots indicates that Harman was intended to sport a beard. What later artistic felon dared to shave the King's Barber is something that perhaps we shall never know. The next man is James Monford, the King's Surgeon, who was twice Senior Warden of the Company, followed by John Penn, a King's Barber who was Master of the Company in 1539 and whose portrait (Fig. 6) was so greatly coveted by

Sir Robert Peel that he offered to buy it for £2000 and to make good the damage to the picture. Finally on the College picture is Nicholas Alcock, whose appearance on the painting is something of a mystery for although he was a Freeman of the Company, he never held high office. How he came to occupy the place he did is by no means clear.

Alsop and Ferris

So much, then, for the men who appear on both pictures. Certainly of no less interest are those who appear on one picture but not on the other. There are two additional men in the front row of the Barbers' picture, one at each end, and the men in the back row are entirely different from those on the College painting. To the left of the Royal Physicians as one looks at the Barbers' picture the King's Apothecary, Thomas Alsop, stands, and even Sidney Young, whose devotion to the painting knew no bounds, could not say more of this figure than that 'his hair is long and dank, and [his] features coarse and hard'. He had much more to say about Richard Ferris, at the opposite extremity of the front row, not only because he became Master of the Company in 1551 and again in 1562 but also because his will (which can still be

seen today in the Public Records Office in Chancery Lane) provides much detail of his books, his surgical instruments, and such worldly goods as his house and orchard in Paddington that he left to his wife, Em, and the feather bed and pewter vessels that he bequeathed to his daughter, Thomazine. Why, one must ask, should this estimable man of property and surgical accomplishment not be present on the College picture? The indications, regrettably, are that he is an interloper who was never meant to occupy the place he does on the Barbers' painting. For if one examines the composition of the painting the position he fills is that of an extra figure, squeezed in; there are, as can be seen, three pairs of men in each of which the man on the right is slightly in advance of his companion; but the positions of the fourth pair are reversed and Ferris, although to the right of Alcock, is behind him. Not only that, but Ferris alone of the men in the front row has a less than reverential demeanour, which would have been a surprising departure from the normal style of Holbein, arch-exponent as he was of deifying the monarch. Most important of all, the evidence of the radiograph suggests that Alcock was intended to be the last of the front row of men. In the areas corresponding to the position occupied by Ferris the radiograph shows clearly the end of the cartoon, with a small area of dots suggesting background decoration.

The men in the back row (Fig. 4)

The major discrepancy between the two pictures centres around the men in the back row and the

background of that part. There can be little doubt that the men in the back row of the Barbers' painting are the principal reason for aspersion having been cast on the authenticity of the work as a whole. When Van Mander said in 1604 that some people believed the painting to have been completed by a painter other than Holbein it seems certain that it was the appearance of the men in the back row that sowed the seeds of doubt. Woltmann (4) wrote of the Barbers' painting: 'A second row of seven more heads, two only of which are designated, X. Samon and W. Tylly, are of later introduction; they are badly drawn, so that no single chin is rightly placed . . .' Woltmann was also scathing about the lack of understanding of art by the guildsmen of earlier times, for he detested 'the roughly painted flowers and fruits, probably introduced at least many years later' as well as 'the names . . . inscribed above the figures in dirty gold colour, and in letters many inches in height, like the inscriptions in Assyrian reliefs'.

There are many examples of similar criticism and it needs no expert in art to recognise that in the Barbers' painting the quality of portraiture is vastly inferior to that of most figures in the front row. But they are also much poorer than those in the back row of the College picture. Comparing the two we can see that in place of the set of lifeless masks on the Barbers' painting the College back row depicts real and recognisable men. Foremost is the superlative portrait of an aged man, bent and cadaverous, with heavy lids and sunken cheeks. Here is a face that no one could fail to identify as that of a toothless man with shrunk muscles and



FIG. 4 *The men in the back row. Detail from the College painting.*



FIG. 5 Details from the Collage painting. Above left, Thomas Vicary; above right, Sir John Aylef; below left, Symson and Harman; below right, James Monford — of all the portraits this is the one with the least paint covering the original cartoon.



FIG. 6 *John Penn. Detail from the College painting.*

flabby jowls and, to dentists, a resorbed alveolar ridge that cannot tolerate a lower denture. However, it is not only his portrait that arouses admiration: behind him are prototypes of men we can recognise today, with idealism, greed, ambition, and strength of purpose all on display.

The background

One of the most striking differences is that to the right of centre the College picture shows a large window through which two spires can be seen, while the same area in the Barbers' painting is dominated by a cartouche inscribed with a paean in praise of King Henry the Greatest. The window in the College picture has usually been regarded as the original design and although the spire was once said to be that of the Church of St Bride's, it has since been suggested that the steeple was that of old St Paul's (destroyed in 1571) and the square tower that of the church of St Augustine which stood to the east of the cathedral (7).

In this respect, certainly, the balance of opinion is that the window was original and that the sycophantic verbiage was not, and assessment on aesthetic grounds alone would certainly favour the view that the original composition has been encroached upon by the cartouche. One of the few experts to express a contrary view was George Redford, who cleaned the painting in 1878 and who wrote in a letter to *The Times* on 3rd February 1890, 'I believe it to be of the time of Holbein both in the Latinity and the work'. Redford's minority view is vindicated by the radiological evidence.

Underneath the painting of the window the outline of the heavy slab of Latin verse is unmistakably delineated.

So, surprisingly, the cartouche turns out to be part of the original composition, but what of the men in the back row — the men who, on the College picture, look so much more like the work of a master than the façade of faces on the Barbers' painting? Here the radiological evidence is incontrovertible. Although much of the area of the back row is obscured to the penetration of X rays, enough remains to be sure that the faces on the College painting are those that Holbein intended and nowhere is this more apparent than in the most unmistakable face of all, that of the Old Man at the Window. As shown in Figure 8 in my previous paper the radiographs prove that there was a cartoon for his face no less than there was for those in the front row, and if the dots are traced the face of the Old Man materialises like a ghost from the forgotten past to revenge himself on Christopher Samon and his colleagues by exposing them for the usurpers they were. The truth will out.

Who was the Old Man at the Window and how did his place come to be taken after the picture had been painted? I have previously suggested that I believe him to be William Kerkby (Kyrckby) on the grounds that there must have been at the time that the picture was painted a man of advanced years holding high office in the Company. William Kerkby fits the bill to perfection. He had been Master of the Company 27 years before the picture was painted (and again in 1525 and 1533) and had also held office of Warden on three occasions, the first time in 1505. The likelihood seems to be that he was an octogenarian by the time the picture was painted and he was still alive and taking part in the Company's affairs in 1553. In the Minutes of the Court of Assistants in the Guildhall Library his name is mentioned repeatedly, and it is noteworthy that in every list of those present it precedes even that of Vicary. I can find no mention of Kerkby's death, either in the records of the Barber Surgeons or in wills kept at the Public Records Office, but his name appears in the Minute Book for the last time in March of the year 1553 and it seems reasonable to assume that his long life ended at about that time.

If Kerkby died in 1553 anyone with a nasty suspicious mind and a sound knowledge of human nature might be tempted to draw inferences from the fact that Christopher Samon, a back row intruder, was Master of the Company at the time. It might also be worth noting that Ferris, who has been insinuated into the front row, was Master in the previous year. Is it beyond the bounds of possibility that someone might have thought of the

idea of making room for the new Master by over-painting old Kerkby after he was no longer there to object? And if Samon could get away with that (and he would have done but for the advent of Roentgen) why should others not do the same and so make the back row of the painting something like an honours board on which holders of high office long after the painting was completed could stake a claim for recognition?

Some time after conceiving this somewhat misanthropic theory I was surprised to find that many years ago a similar possibility had been entertained by Sir Charles Robinson, one-time Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, who, in a letter to *The Times* on 28th August 1895, condemned the men in the back row of the Barbers' picture as being entirely devoid of artistic merit and obviously painted at a later period by a weaker hand; moreover, he speculated that among the guildsmen there was likely to have been 'a relay of . . . claimants for [inclusion in] the upper row of portraits on the right of the picture'. He did say, too, and without the benefit of radiological second sight, that 'they were probably not even indicated on the panel by Holbein, and in fact, formed no part of his original scheme'.

The bond between the two paintings

Whether this discrepancy between the paintings is due to skulduggery or not, nothing can put this unique association asunder. The two paintings are in no sense rival compositions and there can be no dispute about which is authentic. Both were the genuine work of Holbein and the fact that each has suffered the depredations of later hands cannot destroy the chain of circumstances that links them together. Each is much the more remarkable for the existence of the other and the extraordinary bond between them secures their place in the long history of art.

The bond extends beyond past centuries, as is exemplified by the account related in my previous paper of how the two paintings came together again 400 years after they had been painted when they shared a refuge from the London blitz in the

National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. Another captivating incident took place during the last renovation of the College painting at the Courtauld Institute. When successive layers of varnish and grime had been removed from the surface of the painting it was found that part of King Henry's right foot had been obliterated. One of Mr Rees-Jones's assistants, Miss Sarah Hunt, was despatched to Barbers' Hall and there she carefully traced the right foot of King Henry on the Barbers' painting. This cartoon of King Henry's right foot was then brought back to the Courtauld Institute and transferred on to the canvas of the College picture. Verily we have come full circle!

There are, and there will be, many more tales to be told about the most important possession of the Company and that of the College. Suffice it for now to say that each is an enduring emblem of continuity with traditions of the past and that each is a thread in the tapestry of English history. The threads are the stronger because they are intertwined.

The illustrations of the College painting were prepared by Mr G Elia and Mr C Hobbs of the Department of Dental Science. I am grateful to them and to Susan Chamberlain for their help in the preparation of this paper and to Mr B Harris for permission to use his photograph of the Barbers' Company painting.

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